

Arise: Stewardship 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Jeff Marian

Let me tell you two quick stories. When other little girls were dreaming of being doctors or ballerinas, Abby was dreaming of being a museum curator. Abby loved art and couldn't think of anything she'd rather do than be surrounded by it. And that's exactly what she does today. Abby feels an intense sense of responsibility to care for these precious pieces of history and culture that have been placed in her care and making them available for others to enjoy.

Barbara wondered what she was going to do in retirement. But all of that changed when she opened her front door one morning to retrieve her newspaper and discovered a stray dog on her front stoop. Rather than run away, the mutt looked at her with expectant eyes and wagged his tail. Without any collar identify the dog's owner Barbara felt she had no choice but to take the dog to the local animal shelter. And that's when she learned how many strays are euthanized. Standing in that shelter, seeing all those wagging tails and pleading eyes, Barbara knew exactly what she was called to do in retirement. She now manages that animal shelter and feels a tremendous sense of responsibility to find homes for these furry gifts that have been placed in her care.

I've just told you two stewardship stories. We usually think of stewardship as just a financial matter, but stewardship is so much more. As we continue our worship series entitled "Arise" we're going to learn how stewardship is a cornerstone of the Christian movement, central to our life of faith.

When we hear the word "stewardship" we usually think of money, and while that's an important aspect of stewardship, stewardship is also about so much more. As the movement of Jesus began to arise in the early Church, stewardship was central to their understanding of what it meant to be a disciple. And their sense of stewardship was rooted in two core convictions.

First, they believed that everything belonged to the Lord. Everything. From the food on their table to the clothes on their backs to the very bodies they inhabited, those first disciples lived into this radically counter-cultural belief that everything belonged to the Lord. And that belief was rooted in their ancient Scriptures, like this one from Psalm 24, *"The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it. The world and all its people belong to him."* All that they possessed was merely on loan to them.

Second, they believed that everything that God had placed into their care was to be used in alignment with God's purposes as they had been revealed in Jesus. This is why St. Paul referred to himself as a "slave to Christ." Paul believed that his entire life, all that he had and all that he was, was God's, to be used in God's service.

So, stewardship is a framework, a way of seeing ourselves and the world around us, and that framework shapes how we care for everything God has given us and use it all for God's purposes. And so, Abby sees herself as a steward of art. Barbara sees herself as a steward of the animals. Our Creation Care Team sees themselves as stewards of the earth. Our musicians are stewards of their musical gifts. Do you see how this works?

Now listen for how that stewardship framework shows up in today's scripture reading from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. But before I read it, let me provide a little background. Not long after Jesus' resurrection both the Roman and Jewish authorities persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem. While most of the Christians fled to the surrounding territories, some stayed behind, and their lives were hard. To support them, Paul called upon the young churches throughout the surrounding territories to give an offering in support of their struggling sisters and brothers in the faith. Apparently, the Corinthians had promised a generous gift, but had failed to fulfill that promise. Paul writes these words to encourage their stewardship.

¹ Now I want you to know, dear brothers and sisters, what God in his kindness has done through the churches in Macedonia. ² They are being tested by many troubles, and they are very poor. But they are also filled with abundant joy, which has overflowed in rich generosity.

³ For I can testify that they gave not only what they could afford, but far more. And they did it of their own free will. ⁴ They begged us again and again for the privilege of sharing in the gift for the believers in Jerusalem. ⁵ They even did more than we had hoped, for their first action was to give themselves to the Lord and to us, just as God wanted them to do.

⁶ So we have urged Titus, who encouraged your giving in the first place, to return to you and encourage you to finish this ministry of giving. ⁷ Since you excel in so many ways—in your faith, your gifted speakers, your knowledge, your enthusiasm, and your love from us—I want you to excel also in this gracious act of giving.

⁸ I am not commanding you to do this. But I am testing how genuine your love is by comparing it with the eagerness of the other churches. ⁹ You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich.

¹⁰ Here is my advice: It would be good for you to finish what you started a year ago. Last year you were the first who wanted to give, and you were the first to begin doing it. ¹¹ Now you should finish what you started. Let the eagerness you showed in the beginning be matched now by your giving. Give in proportion to what you have. ¹² Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. And give according to what you have, not what you don't have. ¹³ Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. ¹⁴ Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal. ¹⁵ As the Scriptures say,

“Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over, and those who gathered only a little had enough.”

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Did you catch it? Paul is calling those early Christians to steward what God had placed in their care according to God's purposes revealed in Jesus. And since Jesus aligned himself with the poor and those aching at heart, the Corinthians' financial offering in support of the Christians in Jerusalem was good stewardship.

And Paul's words reveal other important principles of faithful stewardship. Things like:

- The amount doesn't matter, but our heart's intention does.

- True stewardship is never a “have to” but always a “get to.”
- We always have enough to be generous with what God has given us.

Stewardship continued to arise in the church, which is why so many orphanages and hospitals, like the Fairview system, have their roots in the Church.

And stewardship continues to arise here at Prince of Peace. In the Mission Outpost Dental Clinic, dentists and hygienists steward their time and skills to care for people in pain. In children's ministry and student ministry, adults steward their time and love by leading small groups and support groups that nurture faith and facilitate people's healing and wholeness. Our prayer team stewards their passion and faith by regularly lifting up the needs of others in prayer. Our church mice steward their time and skills as a way of stewarding this beautiful campus we've been given. Our community gardeners steward the earth to provide food for hungry people. And, of course, all of the ministry we share together is made possible by our collective financial stewardship. None of this happens because we have to, but because we get to. Because God calls us, and God provides.

And again, while stewardship is about much more than money, some of you have asked about where we are these days, and I'd love to tell what God has done through you in our life together.

Fourteen years ago when I started at Prince of Peace we were \$5 million in debt, with little to show for it. We had no reserves and we were making principal-only payments of \$210,000 annually. Today, after significant upgrades to our facility, we have healthy reserves, and we estimate that our principal and interest payments on all we've done to date will be \$162,000 annually, which fits easily within our budget.

Last fall we sent out a mailing to let you know that we were experiencing a \$133,000 shortfall in offerings, mostly due to Covid. To date, you've closed that gap to \$60,000. Simply put, your generosity has been extraordinary.

When stewardship arises, ministry arises. And here's the best part: those who are served and provided for are blessed. And those who serve and give are really blessed.

Let me share just one particular story with you that not only warms my heart but warms the hearts and the bodies of those in a time of crisis. For over 15 years

disciples here at Prince of Peace have been sewing quilts, crocheting and making blankets for patients at Ridges Hospital across the street from our campus. And not just a few quilts and blankets. We've delivered well over 100, just since fall 2021. Many thanks to those who have stewarded their time and talents in this way! Here is Chaplain Lisa Simonsen from Ridges Hospital to tell us a bit about the impact of those handmade gifts of grace and healing.

[VIDEO]

Amazing, isn't it? When stewardship arises, ministry arises. And people are blessed.

So, how is stewardship arising in you? What is the Spirit nudging you to steward differently, more freely or more generously? What is it? Let's pray about that right now, and as we pray, let me invite you to place your hands open and upturned. And now imagine that whatever the Spirit is nudging you to steward differently, more freely or generously...imagine that it's in your hands.

Now let's pray...Generous God, you provide for us in ways we know and in ways we don't. As a people who long to follow in the way of Jesus, teach us to live into the call of stewardship, investing all that you have given us in alignment with your heart and purposes. We offer to you what we imagine in our hands right now... not because we have to, but because we can, believing that we have been blessed to be a blessing. We pray all this in the strong name of Christ and together all God's people said...Amen.